

# Worshiping Jesus

## The One Who Dwelled Among Us!

SANDRA VAN OPSTAL AND STEVE HOKE

The first sound you heard in the cave-black, cavernous St. Louis dome was the clicking of a tap shoe on the stage. The beat quickened, as did the percussion. A spotlight silhouetted a slim dancer pacing the floor, wandering, jumping. Soon he was joined by other dancers, also walking, pacing, leaping. The narrator's voice shattered the silence with John's story of Jesus' lonely descent to dwell among us. We watched Jesus' journey danced for the next 18 minutes. We paused. Then 18,000 voices broke into the Doxology, led first by a soloist, and then joined by the worship band and vocal ensemble. We had been ushered into the presence of the Lord of the Universe!

Not your typical first speaker at an Urbana conference, but an eye-catching and ear-arresting attention-getter for a younger, multicultural audience. Our every sense was activated to focus on Jesus—the One who came and “dwelled among us”—the Urbana '09 conference theme.

The vitality and diversity of the eight-member worship band, the six-person vocal group, and the mixed media was both stirring and served as a prophetic model to all participants—that the worshipping community around the throne has always been and will always be multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural.

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*Sandra Van Opstal served as worship director of Urbana '09 and vocals, is a second-generation Latina who is passionate about people of different cultures coming together to experience God's presence. She spent nine years as an InterVarsity campus staff at Northwestern University. She continues to live in Chicago with her husband as she directs InterVarsity Chicago Urban Program. Sandra gives much of her time to training in reconciliation and multiethnic worship, and is currently working on her Masters of Divinity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.*



Sandra Van Opstal  
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Impressed by the sheer magnitude of planning and orchestrating such richly variegated multicultural worship for over 18,000 participants, mission personnel, pastors and InterVarsity staff, Steve Hoke sought out Sandra Van Opstal, worship director of Urbana '09, for her perspective on worship and missions.

*Sandra, share with us a little of your background and personal journey into worship.*

I studied music as a college student, and was always

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*Steve Hoke serves with Church Resource Ministries (CRM), a mission agency focused on leader development and servant-stewardship in 25 nations. Steve has been heavily involved as a Perspectives lecturer, mobilizer and missionary trainer for the last 30 years, and is shifting his focus to coaching front-line mission leaders and missionaries in life and leadership transitions. As a life-long worshipper, he continues to trace the joyful integration of individual and corporate worship with Abba's heart for the nations. He lives with his wife in Fort Collins, CO. [steve.hoke@crmleaders.org](mailto:steve.hoke@crmleaders.org)*

involved as a vocalist in worship. I volunteered as a worship leader for IV on campus, where I worked for nine years, and now serve as an urban missionary in Chicago. I spent summers rotating between Africa and Asia, mentoring students into cross-cultural missions. But we currently focus our ministry in our local setting, and want to be faithful to our context. I see myself more of a mobilizer than a worship leader. But I love Urbana because it is such a great site for mobilizing young missionaries. The corporate worship setting of Urbana tills the soil of young hearts for missions, and their experiential encounter of who God is.

*What is the connection between diversity and worship within the multicultural Body of Christ, between missionaries being comfortable with and advocates of diversity as servant-messengers in varied cultures around the world?*

First, worship itself is diverse. The variety and range of God's creativity is seen and expressed in the vast range of human approaches to worship. Our music, our instruments, our words, our songs, our liturgies display incredibly different facets of God's character and acts.

When we speak of corporate worship, we must understand that worship is inextricably linked with one's own culture. Missionaries need first to understand their own worship in their own culture: What about God do you love and adore? How do you like best to encounter and experience God?

Most people, unfortunately, cannot articulate their own preference, and thus have trouble gaining a broader perspective on how worship has to be experienced in each culture. For missionaries it is vital to comprehend that there is diversity in worship, in how we understand family, relationships, and even how we do church. It's critical for missionaries to understand their own preferences in order to genuinely help cultures in which they wish to plant fresh expressions of the church. They need to know where they are coming from before they can help new believers create culturally relevant forms of worship in their culture and language.

Paul Gordon Chandler's book, *God's Global Mosaic*, gives a great global glimpse of the peoples of the world through God's eyes. It gives us windows into God's majesty in the creativity of the Russian, Chinese, Thai, and Guatemalan peoples. We

all need other peoples to worship God more fully.

*What's the connection-linkage between worship and missions?*

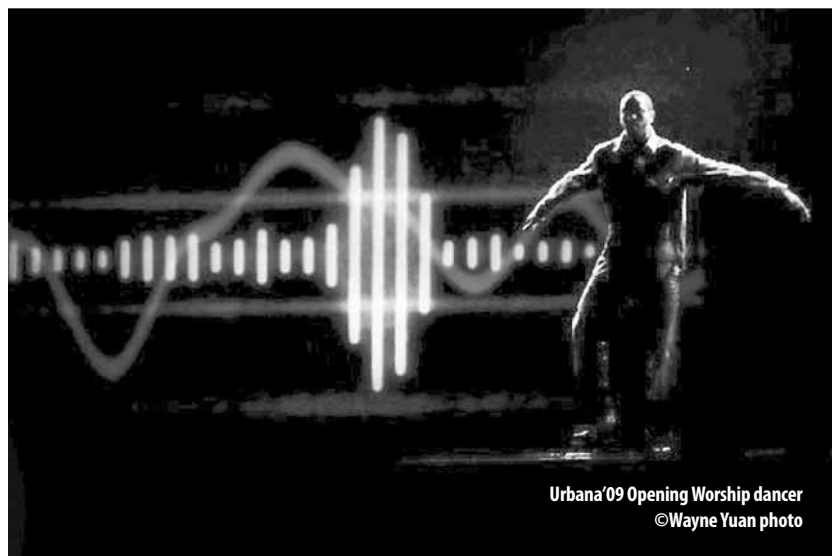
As a worship leader, I see that true worshippers need to move from their own preferences for worship, into the wider expression of worship expressed in God's global family. If God's church is global, obviously worship will be global and culturally distinctive.

Worship is also a dimension that helps us discover more of God. Corporate worship is a vital part of most missionaries' mobilization, because it was in worship that they encountered God and heard him speak to them.

Mark Labberton's *The Dangerous Act of Worship* helped me see that we can help people experience more of God in their own worship songs, before they are able to hear and see the experience of other people. I try to link people with the stories and experience of the poor and broken in other cultures by leading them in songs they know which have the same theme and words. I want to bridge them from what they know to experiences of worship that are not about themselves and just what they know. Worship thus becomes a multi-faceted bridge into broader expressions of praise and deeper experiences of God's grace and unlimited faithfulness.

*Why is it important to help the Church expand its repertoire of worship in our increasingly global Church? What are the key blocks that impede such progress in the American Church?*

Too often when we talk of multicultural or multiethnic worship, people respond that they don't



worship or sing in other languages because there is no diversity in their congregation. If they don't see it in their own church, they think there is no need for diversity.

I don't believe the Church has had an understanding of why worshiping with or alongside of believers from other cultures would deepen their faith. They are waiting for their church to become more diverse before seeking a more diverse experience. They don't conceive that their worship is not as deep, diverse or rich as it could be. They see diversity as nice, but not necessary. I would argue it is necessary to connect with the heart of our brothers and sisters around the world. It is needed for our own personal growth. It is a mandatory pre-step before stepping into cross-cultural mission.

*What's your impression of this generation of students' understanding of worship in mission?*

They are highly experiential, and want to experience things that are different than what they are used to. They are willing to experience challenging and different things, as evidenced in the range of short-term trips they are willing to take. At Urbana '03 we began to model shared leadership, ethnic diversity, and leading across cultures. Students want to know why we are doing what we do. That's why we tried to drop in some teaching and biblical explanation for diversity in worship from the very start of Urbana '09.

*What have you learned about how to help local churches (and missions) grow in their worship experience, to move beyond their favorite worship songs?*

I've learned that people are often afraid of change. Change takes a long time and takes a lot of personal effort.

I've learned that people need to understand why they are doing this, both philosophically and theologically. "Why is this necessary? Why is this change worth the effort?"

Churches are hungry to go deeper, but need to know why. Worship leaders need help in explaining the why. And they want it to be easy—"Tell me what songs to sing and CDs to buy"—instead of really



grasping the broader issues of how and why.

Our world is changing, and too many churches are reactive to what's happening around us, rather than proactively and prophetically moving into what God is doing around them. If a local Caucasian church in a changing neighborhood, for example, would begin to learn some songs in Spanish, if and when Hispanic visitors came, they would feel we were worshiping in their heart language, and they would long to return. Worship can thus be a form of hospitality.

*What is the role of personal worship in cross-cultural missions?*

I can't imagine how an individual could serve between cultures in difficult places without being in regular, intimate relationship with God. It is easy to get busy in activity and cease relating or depending on God. Without personal times with Abba, experiences of weekly Sabbath and retreat, it is dangerous. It is naive that we can sustain ourselves. It is difficult to detect if you are accomplishing anything at all without the discipline of celebration in worship. And, you might miss out on what God is doing around you.

*What is the role of corporate worship in cross-cultural missions? How are these two spheres linked?*

The experience of being in community and worshiping, praying and sharing alongside others is what rejuvenates us and keeps us going. I live and work in a multiethnic community, and living missionally together helps me see that I am a part of something bigger. Without the perspective and encouragement of others, you can become self-righteous, you can become isolated.

*How would you encourage prospective cross-cultural servants to go deeper in personal worship?*

What's helped me is learning to worship God and practice the disciplines that help me connect with God in new ways, in ways that have stretched me beyond what I used to know. For example, the retreats I used to attend were full of activity, talking and teaching. Now I value retreats of silence, of time for listening, fasting, and reflection. None of these were part of my former worship pattern. It helps deepen as well as stretch us to experience aspects that are new to us.

*How would you encourage prospective cross-cultural servants to go deeper in corporate worship?*

Start locally. Visit nearby churches regularly where you are not the majority person. For example, visit a Latino church, or a younger church, or an African-American church. The experience of displacement is critical to recognizing how different you are—right here in your own culture. Step into places and worship where you are not the majority. Learn to follow worship leaders that are unlike you. Allow them to deepen and teach you. This is a part of learning servanthood.

*Why and how is worship inextricably linked to world evangelization?*

I believe that the world is changing and the Church is adapting to stay in touch with the world that is rapidly becoming multicultural, diverse. We need to learn to be in community and be able to experience God and worship with our brothers and sisters around the world.

I am constantly seeing how global God's Church is. Renewal and explosive growth is not happening in my neighborhood, so I need to learn from what God is doing in Argentina, Africa and Asia. The mission world is completely changing. Worship keeps my heart linked to God's global causes and His movements of freshness and fire.

*What helps you enter the presence of God on a consistent basis?*

First, a commitment to rhythms of worship and discipline. As a busy person in ministry, I regularly Sabbath on Sunday; I retreat for one day a month. Creating that space gives me time and room to hear from God. Ruth Haley Barton's book, *Sacred Rhythms*, says it best in her intro: "The disciplines themselves are basic components of the rhythm of intimacy with God that feed and nourish the soul, keeping us open and available for God's surprising initiatives in our lives. After we learn the disciplines, there is infinite creativity for putting them together in a rhythm that works for us and great freedom for adding other disciplines and creative elements" (page 15).

Second, being involved in community—regular involvement in intentional community. Build your life into living among and with people with whom you study, pray and worship. If you don't do it now, it will not be automatic when you move across cultures. Living in community is a learned heart-attitude and Kingdom skill.

*Any closing thoughts?*

It is an extreme privilege and necessary part of understanding our God to learn from people who are different from us about what it means to worship God. For many of us, we have the opportunity to do that now, right where we live. That is a blessing and gift from the Lord. f

